

A Closer Look at Rural Tourism

EQUATIONS

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The concept of rural tourism is still in its nascent stage. Explorations are ongoing to shape models that can be adapted across different contexts/regions in the country. This paper provides a brief background to rural tourism in India and then identifies some of the prerequisites and principles that need to be satisfied if we wish to see equitable rural tourism development.

Riding on their imperial horses,
Flying like kings,
Thinking that they've understood everything.
Do they not realise that even birds fly?
- Tashi Rabgyas angered by tourists, 1980 (Hodge, 1991: 91)¹

Tashi Rabgyas, a resident of Ladakh, expressing his feelings on tourists who have invaded the town of Ladakh, located in the northern most state of Jammu & Kashmir. This growing tension between the tourists and the local community in rural areas is becoming more apparent by the day.

Key parameters that usually define rural tourism are: about it being located in rural areas, functionally rural; based on small-scale and traditional activities and enterprises (rural in scale), relies on the traditional qualities of the countryside, develops slowly under the control of local people and is non-uniform (reflecting the complexity of the rural environment). It is a form of tourism that extends itself to all senses, touching on the physical and psychological level.

Visits to rural areas are becoming extremely popular, especially among the urban masses because of which some visible trends are emerging. Tourism if appropriately planned and regulated, benefit the local community financially, through employment generation and the development of a region by broadening the economic base, establishing inter-sectoral linkages, creating the multiplier effect and improving infrastructure. It also cultivates sensitivity to different cultures, while aiding in the preservation of heritage and the environment. However, tourism brings with it a form of urbanisation, which, in principle, is in conflict with the idea of rural tourism. With growing visitations to rural areas, the rurality of the place and its people will change, moving closer towards urbanisation. Secondly, tourism in these places will increasingly be viewed as a commodity that can be marketed by the tourism industry and consumed by the tourist. Thirdly, while planning a tourism project care must be taken that the protection and participation of the more vulnerable within society, particularly women, children and indigenous people and those marginalised on the basis of caste is ensured. The challenge of developing tourism in a rural area is to find the right balance.

Background on Rural Tourism in India

The recognition of rural tourism as a form traces itself to an International Conference and Exhibition on Rural Tourism in India organised by Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in association with the Udaipur Chambers of Commerce and Industry in 2001². The basic concept of rural tourism was envisaged with benefit accruing to local community through entrepreneurial opportunities, income generation, employment opportunities, conservation and development of rural arts and crafts, investment for infrastructure development and preservation of the environment and heritage. Early movers in adopting the concept of developing and promoting rural tourism have been Haryana, Rajasthan and Kerala³, who have later been followed by Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka among other states.

In the National Tourism Policy of 2002, the Ministry of Tourism (MoT) announced its plans of spreading tourism development to rural areas: '*village tourism will be promoted as the primary tourism product of India; to spread tourism and its socio-economic benefits to rural areas*' is what it stated. One of the outcomes of this was the Endogenous Tourism Project between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Ministry of Tourism in 2003. The project focuses on "initiating and building upon a number of community-level initiatives to address issues of poverty, through group mobilisation around income-generation activities buttressed by skill endowment and credit/ resource support issues". This project is being implemented across 36 sites in 20 states of India⁴. Apart from this project, the Ministry of Tourism in the last five-year plan has funded 43 more sites, with state

governments and even banks such as NABARD, State Cooperative Bank, Syndicate Bank willing to invest and loan towards rural tourism.

Rural tourism as an option to be further explored and developed, finds a clear impetus in the Report of the Working Group on Tourism for the 11th five-year plan. The working group broadly recommends a panel of professionals to be identified for selecting rural sites, interacting with the community and preparing projects based on tourism potential of the rural site. The recommendation is that no rural tourism project is to be sanctioned without prior approval of the software (capacity building) component so as to ensure that the host rural community plays a critical role in project implementation and monitoring in the existing rural sites with the objective of ensuring success⁵.

The recognition of rural tourism as an alternative to mainstream mass tourism is a recent concept. The government (at centre, state and local level), the tourism industry, as well as local groups/ organisations are putting in concerted efforts to see that these models of community-based tourism find success. However, caution must be heeded in relation to impacts that this form of tourism may have on the environment, its people and on the institutional structures of the region. Therefore, the need is to anticipate and plan so as to mitigate these negative impacts.

Economic

Tourism has the ability to generate high income, employment benefits for the local economy, empowering women and in improving livelihoods of local people through its multiplier effects. Yet other less favourable effects such as inflation, leakages out of the local economy and dependency often accompany these positive effects. These need to be weighed carefully, based on accurate assessments of the actual economic effects.

Increasing the percentage of tourism revenues retained within the local economy by reducing leakages

The economic rationale behind encouraging tourism is that through its linkages with other sectors of economy, revenues generated can increase the economic prosperity of the local people. This argument would not hold if revenue generated from tourism were not retained within the local economy but lost in the form of leakages⁶ out through repatriation or other means thereby nullifying the potential gains to the local economy. For example if a hotel is owned by an investor from outside, the percentage of benefits derived by locals from tourism will never be as high as the investors. The same will be the case if the hotel imports consumables thinking that there is demand for them or that their quality would be superior. Recognising this possibility, when planning for tourism, one becomes more conscious towards strengthening local sourcing of materials required by tourism. The ideal situation would of course be if all of tourism's requirements were met by the local economy. But until such a stage is reached, the endeavour should be to reduce importing from outside the region/state as far as possible.

For instance, the experience of Coorg in Karnataka illustrates the case of local linkages in home stay tourism. With the fall in coffee prices in the mid-1990s, the local community in Coorg turned to tourism as to support the local economy. The concept of homestays picked up quite rapidly and was a form that established strong linkages with existing sectors thereby retaining a large volume of the revenue earned within the local economy. With the raw material to sustain tourism activity already existing in the form of estate bungalows, the plantations, road connectivity and other civic amenities, owners needed to invest only moderately in inception costs. Since the guests stay in the homes of people, they are taken around the coffee and spice estates, encouraged to try local cuisine and to learn about the cultures and customs of the place. This form also benefits the economy as the coffee, fruits, vegetables are grown and procured locally and the guest is encouraged to purchase from shops selling locally grown coffee, cardamom, honey and cinnamon.

Supporting small, medium enterprises (SMEs) and informal sector initiatives in tourism

In order to allow tourism to benefit and sustain the local economy, mechanisms must be developed to encourage and support small and medium enterprises that require low levels of investment but provide high levels employment to the local labour force. This would help assess the extent of local participation in the tourism industry, the benefits that the local industry derives from it and how sustainable tourism is for the local economy.

Strengthening local ownership of tourism

Tourism can play a meaningful role in increasing the ownership of local communities in tourism. The question of ownership is linked to communities' bargaining power in the industry, range of jobs they have access to and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the economy itself.

For example, in the village of Khonoma, located in the state of Nagaland, North-Eastern India, an alternative model of community-led tourism development is taking shape. It was the community, which took a decision to bring in tourism and improve the living conditions of the people. The thrust is on training local people, supporting alternative technologies based on intrinsic conservation properties; planning better utilisation of energy, conducting an environmental impact assessment including social aspects and open specific areas for tourism purposes with limited access. As tourism in Khonoma has emerged from a need expressed by the community, the chances that it will be developed on the basis of guidelines, regulations and priorities decided by them are much higher. The community has clearly stated that the tourist flow has to be regulated. The village suggested facilitating accommodation for 20 tourists and gradually increase the numbers. Considering the environmental and social sensitivity of the region, several pertinent regulations like regulating traffic in the forests, limiting cooking to designated places with proper waste disposal mechanisms and even guidelines to regulate the noise level in the forests have been developed.

Providing access to participate and influence the project

Tourism planners and implementers while planning a rural tourism project must ensure that all members of the community have access to participate and influence the direction of the project. Rural Indian society is particularly stratified on the lines of caste, class, traditional occupation and gender roles resulting in differential access to voice, resources and power. A positive example illustrated by the National Institute of Women Child and Youth Development, the implementing agency for endogenous tourism project at Chougan, points that caste based stigma prevalent among the Gond, Baiga groups have considerably reduced. During the cultural performances, members of the communities are forgetting their hierarchy. The Chougan Utsav had provided an opportunity for nearly 10 cultural groups to perform in one major event.⁷ Until specific processes are set in place to work on social structures such as caste, it must be recognised that the entry of tourism may well work in the opposite direction - with perpetuating the status quo in terms of access and occupation. Caution must be taken to ensure that a wide group of people representing different sections and interests are able to influence and therefore benefit from the project. Imbalanced benefit sharing may increase the gap between the poor and rich creating a situation of intra-community competition that may unintentionally accentuate existing inequities and divides.

Evaluating dependency of the local economy on tourism

Tourism is seasonal and vulnerable to external and internal impacts. These could include disasters (like the tsunami, earthquakes), health epidemics (SARS, chikungunya), political tensions (riots and terror threats) and factors in tourist source regions (inflation, airline strikes). In such circumstances while the entire industry suffers, often it is the local people who are the most vulnerable either by a loss of employment or steep income reductions. Given this, it becomes important to regulate the dependency of local livelihoods and income on tourism. While planning, diversifying the local economy base and strengthen linkages with other primary sources of income like fisheries, agriculture and local handicrafts are critical elements to reduce the vulnerability of these communities.

Social

Article V of the WTO Global Code of Ethics states that the local population should be associated with tourism activities and share equitably in the economic, social and cultural benefits they generate. They must benefit from the direct and indirect jobs created by tourism and tourism policies should be oriented towards improving their standard of living. The need to stress the role that the local communities play in tourism destinations arises from the variety of ways in which tourism affects their lives and livelihoods. Tourism needs to provide a base for social and cultural exchanges to take place between the local communities and the tourists on an equal platform without the former feeling inferior and taking pride in their culture and traditions. When local communities respect and protect their social and cultural values, others too learn to respect it.

Efforts at sensitising tourists to local culture, social norms and customs

Tourism is an excellent opportunity to learn about other societies, their culture, traditions and lifestyles. The impacts of culture can be positive - through fostering an exchange of cultures and cultural enhancement. The nature of tourism is that it gives the tourist the opportunity to be transported into a different, often exotic socio-cultural ambience and a chance to appreciate the unique cultural, traditional lifestyles and tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the region. The WTO Global Code of Ethics has recognized that cultural resources used by tourists belong to entire mankind but the community in whose territories they are situated have particular rights and obligations. Tourism must endeavour to protect and preserve tangible heritage and must allow and encourage cultures to flourish rather than get standardised and die out. It is important for tourists to have greater sensitisation of local norms and customs. Along with this comes the understanding that local communities are not just 'host communities' but local

residents who have an identity and own the space that is visited. This highlights the need to regulate tourist behaviour when such norms are violated.

There have been initiatives to achieve such sensitisation. The Ministry of Tourism on its website has put out a statement asking travellers to “learn about your destination before you get there. Read guidebooks, travel articles, histories, and/or novels by local authors and pay particular attention to customs such as greetings, appropriate dress, eating behaviours, etc. Being sensitive to these customs will increase local acceptance of you as a tourist and enrich your trip; follow established guidelines by staying on trails, packing up your trash, and remaining set distances away from wildlife are a few ways to minimize your impact in sensitive areas and to seek out and support locally owned businesses as supporting local businesses during your eco-travels to ensure maximum community and conservation benefit from your spending”.⁸

The local administration of Ajmer (Rajasthan) came out with basic guidelines following a series of incidents of insensitive and inappropriate tourist behaviour. These guidelines are ‘to educate and sensitise foreign tourists about local culture and sensibilities.’ The booklet has been disseminated widely among hotels and restaurants that have been asked to give copies of the same to the tourists. It advises tourists on cultural and religious sensibilities like not to drink alcohol, smoke, and embrace in public.⁹

Strengthening social infrastructure and basic amenities

Tourism can make significant differences to lives of local communities by contributing to social infrastructure like health and supporting supply of basic amenities like drinking water, electricity and communication. These facilities will benefit both local communities and tourists but for the former it will mean an improvement in standard of living and building capacity for future generations. A less studied area is the links between tourism and increase in crime, which are often the result of the demonstration effect of increased consumerism. The growing alarming links between tourism and issues relating to drugs, trafficking and HIV/AIDS need to be kept in mind.

Minimising exploitation and strengthening the decision-making role of women in tourism

Tourism impacts women in diverse ways and is reflective of the larger economic, social, political and cultural roles played by them in the society. Prostitution, misrepresentation, trafficking and sex tourism are some of the directly visible forms of exploitation of women in tourism. A gender bias also persists in the industry with regard to women employees in service provision either through wage discrimination or the type of job they have access to relative to men. Women are also more impacted than men by the adverse socio-cultural impacts of tourism and denial of access to basic resources to run households. Improving the role of women in decision-making in tourism can help strengthen their role in society and mitigate adverse impacts better. Supporting women’s entrepreneurship especially in SME and cottage industries in tourism and ancillary activities can greatly improve the economic benefit they derive.

Cultural

The impacts of culture can be both positive - through fostering an exchange of cultures and cultural enhancement or negative through commodification of culture, deterioration in traditional systems and loss of cultural identity. The nature of tourism is that it gives the tourist the opportunity to be transported into an alien socio-cultural ambience and a chance to appreciate the unique cultural, traditional lifestyles and tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the region. The WTO Global Code of Ethics has recognized that cultural resources used by tourists belong to the entire mankind but that community in whose territories they are situated have particular rights and obligations, that while planning a rural tourism project, one must endeavour to protect and preserve tangible heritage and that tourism must allow cultures to flourish rather than get standardized and die out.

Broadening our understanding of local ‘culture’

Culture is an experience, not a product. Local culture comprises more than just costumes and dancing – it includes food, architectural style, language, local arts and handicrafts and all else that constitutes a way of life. At times, tourism provides an opportunity to revive dying arts, crafts and art forms – but it also runs the risk of infusing commercialisation, standardisation, adaptation of tourist demands and monotony into such aspects of local culture. When the artist becomes the artisan, something is wrong in the way culture and tourism interact. Tourism must be an opportunity to instil pride within communities on the richness and diversity of their culture – it must never become a medium to exhibit or showcase culture. This calls for sensitivity in what tourism promotes, how tourists behave and how the destination is portrayed. Tourism, if promoted sensitively, can also help bring back old-world charms of community cultural activities.

Environment

Rural tourism must incorporate principles of conservation of natural resources and biodiversity; rational utilisation of resources, creation and maintenance of tourism infrastructure and facilities that are in coherence with the needs of local environment and culture. Also with increase in tourist activity caution must be heeded that access to and use of common property resources to local community are not being restricted to benefit the tourists / industry.

Judicious use of natural resources

Tourism enterprises like most others need to use resources like land, water and energy. But this needs to be accompanied by sensitisation towards over-consumption, wastage and over-utilisation of resources. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has recommended that tourism must be undertaken keeping in mind the land use patterns. Water is a particularly useful case study given its ubiquitous scarcity. Some tourism enterprises have begun mainstreaming water conservation principles into their daily practices. They vary from advising the tourist to go easy on water consumption within the rooms, help reclamation of local drying water bodies, investing in rain harvesting and recycling sewage and waste water for other uses. The use of energy efficient practices particularly in construction (local materials) and in day to day operating such as alternatives to air-conditioning is a critical factor.

Controlling pollution and adopting effective waste-management practices

Like all other development activities, tourism has a challenge to control pollution and adopt effective waste-management practices. The advantage is dual – not just that the environmental and ecological balance is maintained but that the beauty and pristine nature of the destination remain as an attraction. The World Bank has a useful publication called the 'Pollution Prevention and Abatement Handbook',¹⁰ which addresses tourism and hospitality as well. It has useful tips on how developers can control pollution by careful choice of materials in the construction stage, water management and effluent reduction, emission testing indicators and treatment and control technologies even for noise pollution.

Some of the activities that could be explored within rural tourism are:

- Encouraging tourism enterprises to adopt recycling, composting as a means of treating solid and non-solid wastes
- Discouraging the use of non-biodegradable materials like plastic as far as possible
- Giving tourists/residents tips on garbage segregation which makes recycling a faster and more effective task
- Setting up mechanisms of monitoring pollution levels
- Ensuring a good availability of dustbins at around the tourist spots and the village!

Institutional

A process of democratic decision-making must be created within the structures that support spaces where informed consensus building and decision-making can materialise, where components of meaningful and informed participation of local people and local political institutions in decision-making spaces that in effect influence the course of functioning of the tourism and related industries.

Also, caution must be observed to not create parallel structures and bodies but to work with the 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution of India, which accords rights and legal powers to local governing bodies. The panchayats, can bring into their jurisdiction matters related to subjects of land, water, socio-economic development, infrastructure development, social welfare, social and urban forestry, waste management and maintenance of community assets. Tourism development falls under the purview of these subjects and therefore participation from the Panchayats is important. The Panchayats should be involved in all level of tourism development from approval of the tourism project, to planning, implementing, development, marketing, evaluating, monitoring, and research. The Panchayats have the right to formulate regulatory frameworks and the onus of ensuring this and its compliance from the tourism industry would rest on the State government.

Conclusion

The concept of rural tourism is still in its nascent stage with explorations on to shape the most appropriate models that can be adapted across different contexts/regions in the country. Tourism is emblematic of the paradoxes and challenges of modern development. It has the potential to be an intensely human experience and equally the potential to be an extremely consumerist one. The need of the hour is to align rural tourism under the broad ambit of sustainable development. Essentially, the basis of sustainable tourism development is a conscious recognition of the relationship that exists between the three key components of tourism – the environment, the local community who

are impacted by tourism, and the operating tourism enterprises. Finding a balanced approach amongst the three is the perennial challenge.

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End Notes

1 Hodge, N Helena. 1991, Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh, Oxford University Press, Oxford

2 FICCI to host conference on rural tourism, Business Line, Bangalore, 11th July 2001

3 Tap rural India's tourism potential, says FICCI, Richa Mishra, Business Line, New Delhi 26th July 2001

4 Rural Tourism: It's a Niche That India Can Offer, Ashok B. Sharma, Financial Express, Bangalore, 23rd August 2004

5 XI Five Year Plan, Tourism Working Group Report: <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/11thf.htm>

6 Leakages: In understanding the economics of tourism, the term leakage refers to the direct income for an area - the amount of tourist expenditure that remains locally after taxes, profits and wages are paid outside the area and after imports are purchased; these subtracted amounts are called leakage (Source: www.uneptie.org/pc/tourism/sust-tourism/economic.htm)

7 Questionnaire administered by EQUATIONS for the Workshop on Critical issues in Tourism, Institution Building for Sustainable Tourism and Livelihoods, organised by IRMA and UNDP, 18th to 23rd September 2006

8 http://www.incredibleindia.org/newsite/cms_Page.asp

9 Singh, Jyotsna (2005) Indecency guide for tourists to India; BBC News (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4474528.stm)

10 http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/main?pagePK=64193027&piPK=64187937&theSitePK=523679&menuPK=64187510&searchMenuPK=64187282&theSitePK=523679&entityID=000094946_99040905052283&searchMenuPK=64187282&theSitePK=523679